

Tom Warren, photo portraits. Includes photos of artists, neighborhood people, and children with their parents on Halloween.



Founders  
Era

ARTIFACTS

ABC NO RIO





*This issue is dedicated to  
Maria, Raymond &  
Manny Acosta*



**PAY  
OR GET OUT**

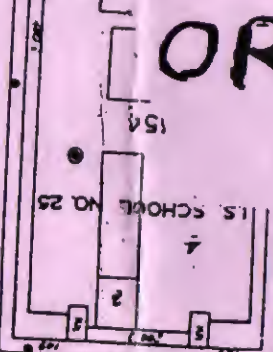
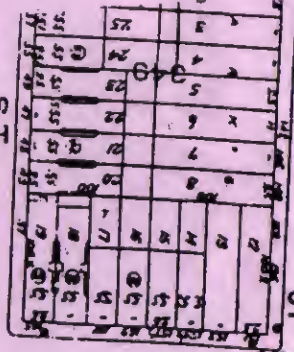
Robin Winters, Pay or Get Out, ink on paper.



ILLUSTRATION OF WOOD  
BURNING STOVE IN  
NO RIO GALLERY, 1980  
BY MARIA ACOSTA

COVER PHOTOGRAPH  
Ann Messner with ball cutters used to enter 125 Delancey Street.  
(Photo by Peter Moennig.)

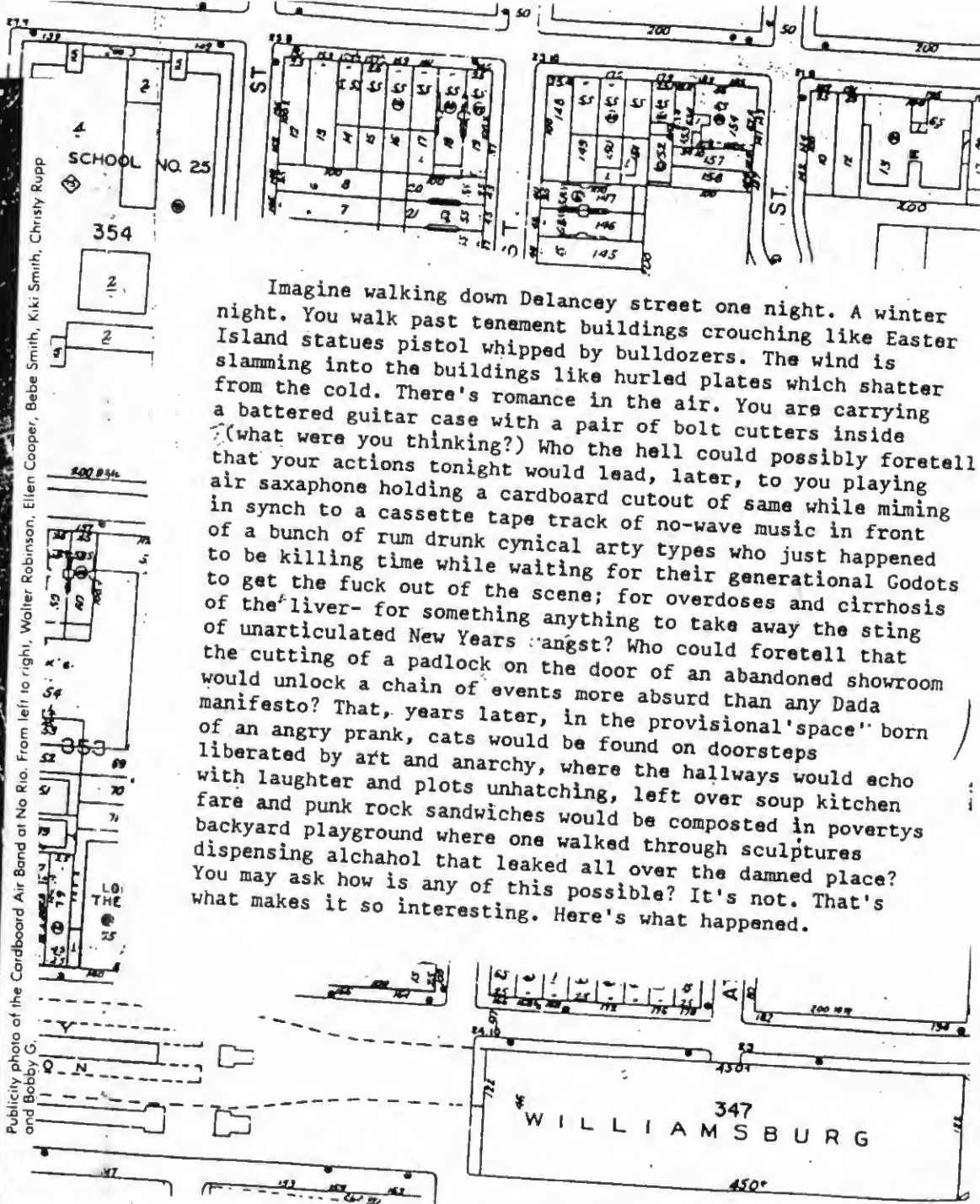
ABC No Rio  
156 Rivington St.  
254-3697







Publicity photo of the Cardboard Air Band at No Rio. From left to right, Walter Robinson, Ellen Cooper, Bebe Smith, Kiki Smith, Christy Rupp and Bobby G.



Imagine walking down Delancey street one night. A winter night. You walk past tenement buildings crouching like Easter Island statues pistol whipped by bulldozers. The wind is slamming into the buildings like hurled plates which shatter from the cold. There's romance in the air. You are carrying a battered guitar case with a pair of bolt cutters inside (what were you thinking?) Who the hell could possibly foretell that your actions tonight would lead, later, to you playing air saxophone holding a cardboard cutout of same while miming in synch to a cassette tape track of no-wave music in front of a bunch of rum drunk cynical arty types who just happened to be killing time while waiting for their generational Godots to get the fuck out of the scene; for overdoses and cirrhosis of the liver- for something anything to take away the sting of unarticulated New Years angst? Who could foretell that the cutting of a padlock on the door of an abandoned showroom would unlock a chain of events more absurd than any Dada manifesto? That, years later, in the provisional 'space' born of an angry prank, cats would be found on doorsteps with laughter and plots unhatching, left over soup kitchen fare and punk rock sandwiches would be composted in povertys backyard playground where one walked through sculptures dispensing alchahol that leaked all over the damned place? You may ask how is any of this possible? It's not. That's what makes it so interesting. Here's what happened.



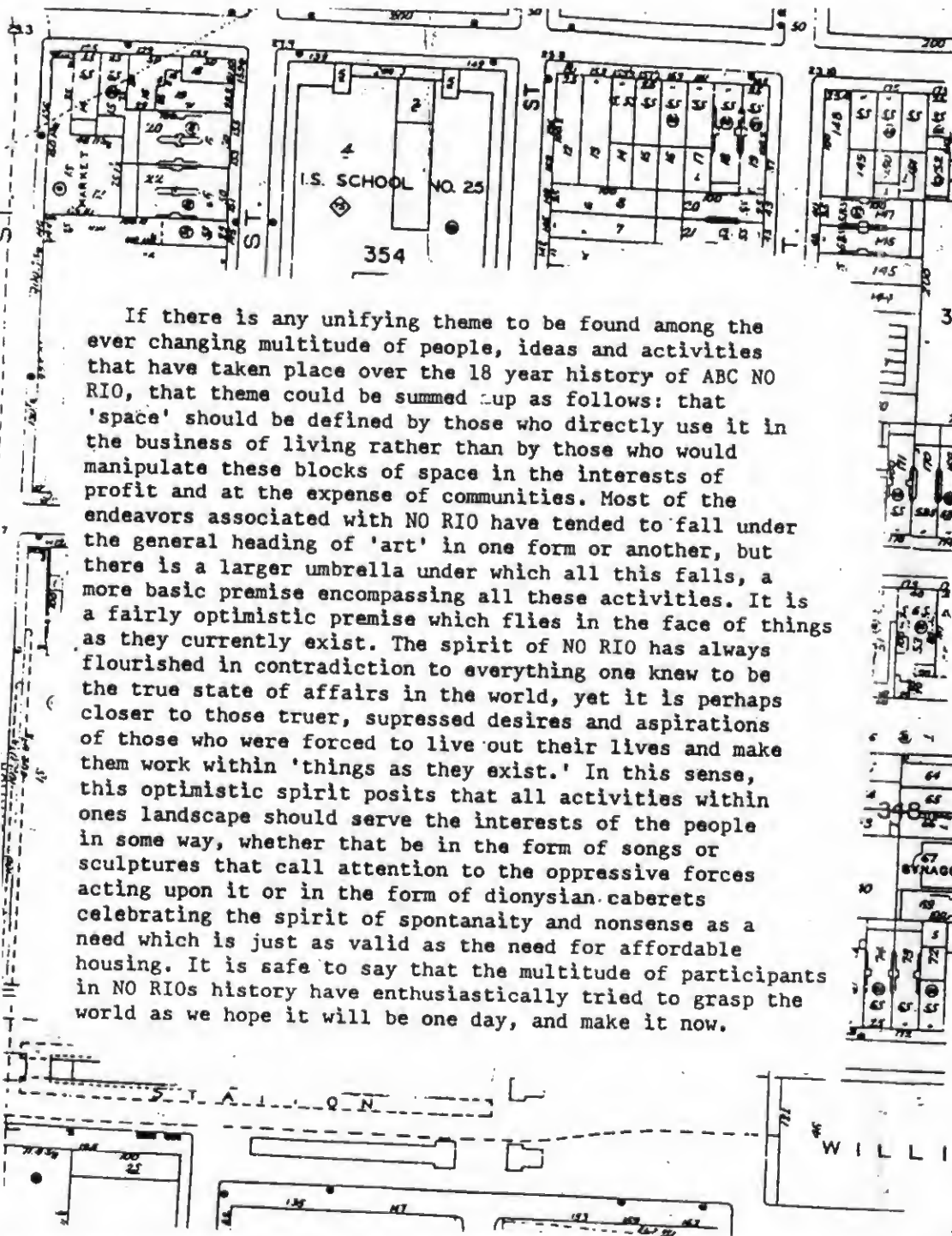
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There were also weekly poetry and performance events. A flyer from that time announces readings by Kathy Acker, Bob Holman, Amiri Baraka, Richard Hell, Bimbo Rivas, Tuli Kupferberg, Jorge Brandon and Keith Haring among others. Occasionally the NO RIO Cardboard Air Band would perform, each member of the band 'playing' cardboard cut-outs of instruments while miming songs played on a tape deck. Much of the formatting for events that occurred during that time are still used today, such as the opening & closing party for visual art exhibitions, the open door exhibition policy and the weekend poetry & spoken word readings. By the end of NO RIO's 3rd year though, operations had expanded beyond the energies of Alan, Becky and Bobby. There were more operating expenses to be met, funding had begun to come in but the writing of grant proposals was a lengthy, daily task. Keeping the building in operating condition, fixing leaks and toilets, getting wood for the wood burning stove for heat in winter, accounting for the gallery's activities on paper to the city and to various funding agencies - seemed to swallow all of their time leaving little for anything else. "We all started to feel more like administrators than artists", says Rebecca, "there just wasn't any time left to pursue our art."

A new era was beginning in NO RIO's history. The next installment in this series will continue to explore the events and contradictions of ABC NO RIO.

NEXT ISSUE: DECADENT PERFORMANCE ERA. OUT: AVG. 3RD

If there is any unifying theme to be found among the ever changing multitude of people, ideas and activities that have taken place over the 18 year history of ABC NO RIO, that theme could be summed up as follows: that 'space' should be defined by those who directly use it in the business of living rather than by those who would manipulate these blocks of space in the interests of profit and at the expense of communities. Most of the endeavors associated with NO RIO have tended to fall under the general heading of 'art' in one form or another, but there is a larger umbrella under which all this falls, a more basic premise encompassing all these activities. It is a fairly optimistic premise which flies in the face of things as they currently exist. The spirit of NO RIO has always flourished in contradiction to everything one knew to be the true state of affairs in the world, yet it is perhaps closer to those truer, suppressed desires and aspirations of those who were forced to live out their lives and make them work within 'things as they exist.' In this sense, this optimistic spirit posits that all activities within ones landscape should serve the interests of the people in some way, whether that be in the form of songs or sculptures that call attention to the oppressive forces acting upon it or in the form of dionysian cabarets celebrating the spirit of spontaneity and nonsense as a need which is just as valid as the need for affordable housing. It is safe to say that the multitude of participants in NO RIO's history have enthusiastically tried to grasp the world as we hope it will be one day, and make it now.



Okra P. Dingle

VIKKI LAW, A.  
DICTATED BY  
COOKIE PUSS







Maria Acosta and a friend by the Tube World signboard in front of No Rio. (Photo by Jody Culkin.)

The history of ABC NO RIO has consistently been a representative microcosm of the larger real estate war being fought across the country during this same period. The combatants consist, on one side, of forces representing the interests of capital and commodification and the various guises which it assumes in the pursuit of profit. These guises include property speculation, bank redlining, purposeful neglect of property, landlord absenteeism and disinvestment, eviction, arson, unnecessary or illegal demolition, artificial creation of housing shortage, misuse of public funds, kickbacks, hiring of thugs to forcibly evict tenants, and overdevelopment, anything which reinforces and enhances the idea of private as opposed to communal property. On the other side have been, typically, those who are not just victim to the infringements of property interests, but to all of the excesses of capital, the working poor, ethnic minorities, single parent families, recent immigrants, artists, students, squatters and grassroots community activists, anyone to whom the idea of community means anything, those who, their lives lacking any economic stability have tried to find it in the psychogeographical landscape itself in the form of what, to a developer, must be a very strange notion - that of the 'neighborhood' and all of its attending factors such as cooperation, ethnic or class identity, sharing of resources and information, fostering of creativity, fixing the old instead of building anew, and self reliance.

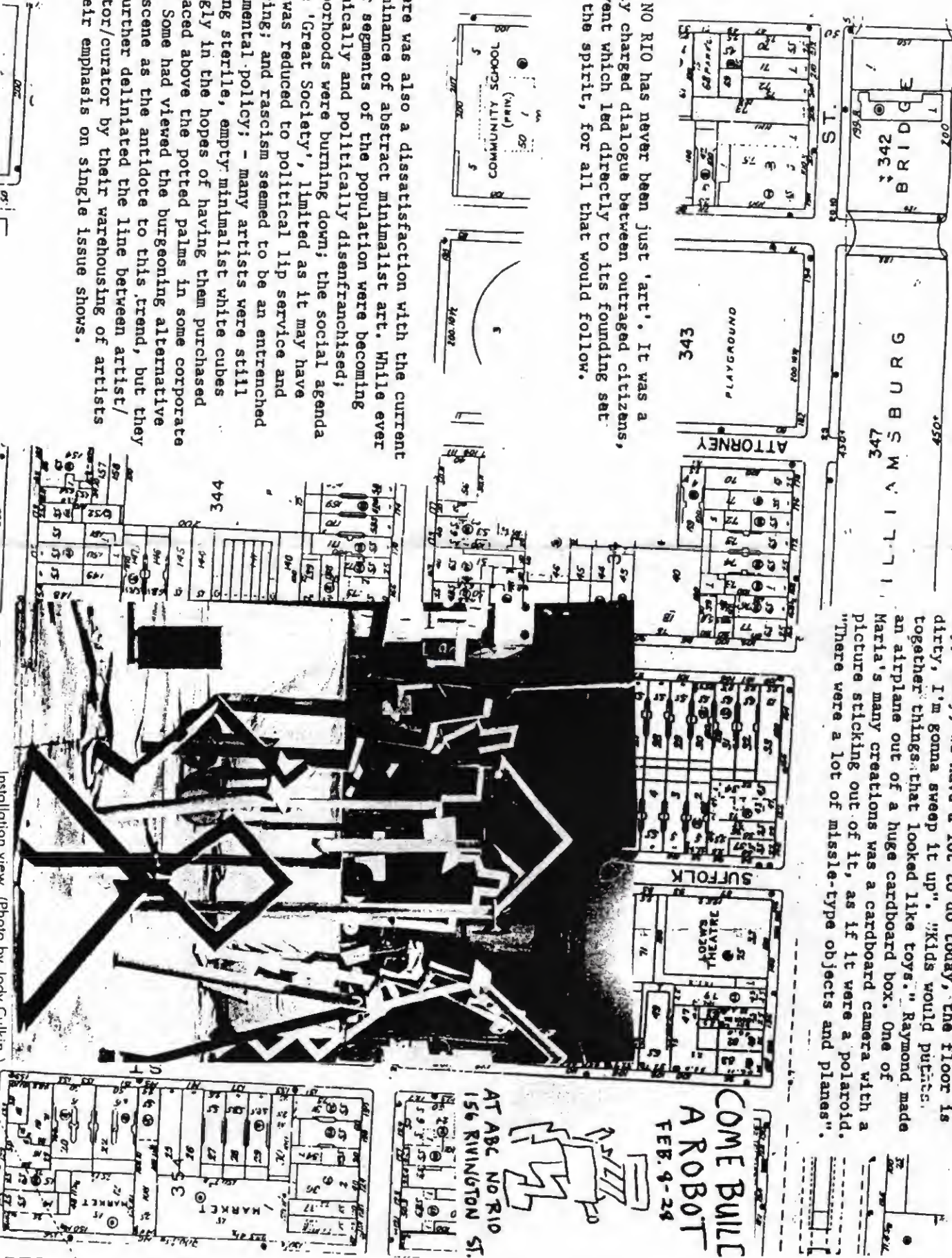
Of course, as diverse as the backgrounds of the individual artists were, and as many different, sometimes conflicting ideas as to what, if anything, can be conveyed through art, specifically activist oriented, content over form art, some things were clear. By 1979, artists looking for affordable live/work space had, along with the original working class residents, been pushed out of formerly affordable neighborhoods. Real estate developers and greedy gallery owners had seen to that. There was a growing sense that artists were being used by real estate interests as gentrification shock troops in city neighborhoods which traditionally had been poor and ethnic. It was clear to everyone that the notion of real estate as investment, as a commodity to be bought, traded or, in the case of many property owners owing back taxes - burnt down to collect the insurance money, rather than as a structural landscape within which a community is fostered, where real, flesh and blood individuals and families pursued their real, flesh and blood dreams, that this notion was so endemic to the entire structure within which it operated as to be its salient, dehumanizing characteristic, contrary to any sustainable, dignity allowing construct of the social contract.



7-year-old Maria was the most actively involved with 'Tube World'. "She wasn't just my assistant, she was my partner," Jody remembers. "She'd come in and say, 'Okay, we have a lot to do today,' the floor is dirty. I'm gonna sweep it up". "Kids would put their things that looked like toys." Raymond made an airplane out of a huge cardboard box. One of Maria's many creations was a cardboard camera with a picture sticking out of it, as if it were a polaroid. "There were a lot of missile-type objects and planes".

Art at NO RIO has never been just 'art'. It was a politically charged dialogue between outraged citizens, and the event which led directly to its founding set the pace, the spirit, for all that would follow.

There was also a dissatisfaction with the current pre-eminence of abstract minimalist art. While ever larger segments of the population were becoming economically and politically disenfranchised, neighborhoods were burning down; the social agenda of the 'Great Society', limited as it may have been, was reduced to political lip service and posturing; and racism seemed to be an entrenched governmental policy; - many artists were still painting sterile, empty minimalist white cubes seemingly in the hopes of having them purchased and placed above the potted palms in some corporate lobby. Some had viewed the burgeoning alternative space scene as the antidote to this trend, but they only further delatated the line between artist/spectator/curator by their warehousing of artists and their emphasis on single issue shows.



Installation view. (Photo by Jody Calkin)



Artist Jody Culkin remembers putting together a show called 'Tube World'. "It seemed problematic that the community wasn't involved in NO RIO". Jody Culkin's plan for Tube World was to involve the neighborhood children in the creation of an environment out of cardboard. "I was already making sculptures out of cardboard and glue," Jody recalls. Using cardboard tubes as a medium stemmed from both Jody's use of cardboard and the availability of tubes to be found on the street. "Christy helped me go pick up the tubes. We had access to a vehicle & we picked them off the street. Crosby street had a lot." From there, Jody visited schools both in the neighborhood & further away, presenting the idea for 'Tube World' and giving flyers to the students there. At the schools further from the neighborhood, the teachers were somewhat skeptical, asking, "would you want your kids in that neighborhood?"

One woman, who was working as an artist in public schools, brought different groups of students each time she visited. "Not a lot of kids came off the street. The neighborhood was a lot more dangerous. There weren't a lot of kids wandering around." Parents dropped their kids off at 'Tube World' because they considered NO RIO safe. "The Acosta kids seemed to wander down at all hours," Jody recalls. "Maria and her two brothers came every day. A little boy who was Maria's buddy came a lot too." Maria's 9-year-old sister would give Jody Spanish lessons while Jody was doing gallery hours. "She'd write things down & think of what would be important to say". The youngest Acosta, 2 year old Manny, would also make his appearance, although he was too young to really build anything. "Manny was really big & he couldn't really talk. It was like this primitive force. We thought he'd break everything."

The Real Estate show was a collaborative installation that, in a way, was the next logical step in a series of public exhibitions that had been mounted by the member artists of Colliab. Inc., a loose affiliation of multi-media artists who had banded together to pool resources and funding. Since governmental agencies granting funds to artists would do so only to incorporate entities -read 'galleries' - and tended to ignore the lone, unknown artist who may not be producing works with a specific commercial audience -again, read 'galleries' - in mind, several of these artists decided to band together, incorporate for the purpose of obtaining funds, and subvert the gallery process altogether and take their art directly to the streets, to the people for whom their usually subversive images and ideas were intended in the first place. There was a participatory sensibility bent on erasing the barriers between the viewer and the process, so that the viewer became an equal participant in the artistic transaction.

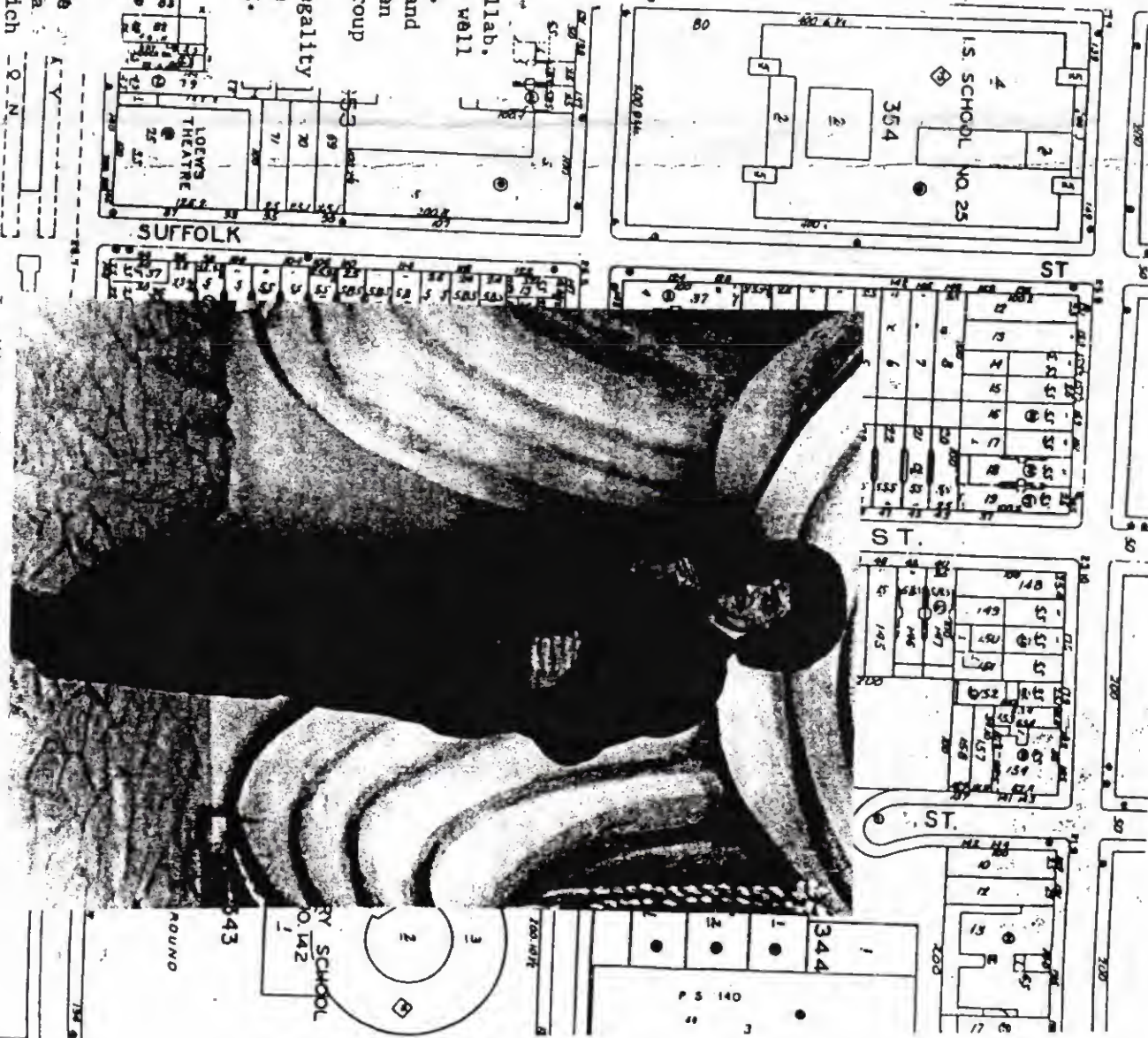
It was only natural that the next step would be to illegally occupy a space to highlight the soaring rents of Manhattan, while the city was warehousing so much of its housing stock in the form of abandoned properties which simply sat, and sat, becoming 're-vitalization' or for a nod from housing agencies and developers to tear them down in order to make way for the monolithic filing cabinets for the city's poor in the form of monstrous housing projects. At the same time, the show was conceived as an insurrectionary act which would reach out directly to those usually ignored by the mainstream art world. It was a gesture of solidarity with those who suffered most from the remote, racist, profit hungry decision-making machine that had allowed these neighborhoods to deteriorate in the first place.



Their art could be characterized by the rejection of formal considerations of the gallery world in favor of assemblages of materials drawn from the subject matter itself, which created a gritty syntax about life under occupation. The use of abandoned buildings, parking lots, converted lofts, subway cars, bridges, scrap metal, cracked toilets, pigeons and roaches and spray paint, it all coalesced into an act of reclamation of the objects which formed the psychological context of tenement life, it was a rebellion by those who felt themselves to be presented with only two choices: be commodified or discarded. It was the art of rhetoric with attitude which held a lot in common with the reclaiming of a perjorative epithet to denote self empowerment. As Leonard Abrams of the East Village Eye, who would later become involved with NO RIO has said of that time, "We were more interested in breaking out of the art world than boring into it."

Although many of the artists came out of the Collab. milieu, it drew an assortment of other artists as well and was not, strictly speaking, a Collab. project. Highlighting the dependence of artists on funding and the contradictions within this type of mindset, even within a self proclaimed radical anti commercial group of artists, many of Collab members declined to participate in the Real Estate Show due to the illegality of squatting in a city owned building. They feared the attention of police as well as losing their funding.

What they didn't realize at the time was that the building they chose for their boulevard pulpit was a cornerstone in a massive new development project which would encompass several blocks along Delancey St. The city offices of H.P.D. (Housing Preservation and Development, which later activists would redub Housing Prevention and Destruction) became alarmed, possibly believing that the artists knew more than they actually did and that they represented an organized political force within the neighborhood.



Tom Warren, photo portrait.

AMDC



# "ANIMAL SHOW" by Susanah Sedgewick, East Village Eye, 1980

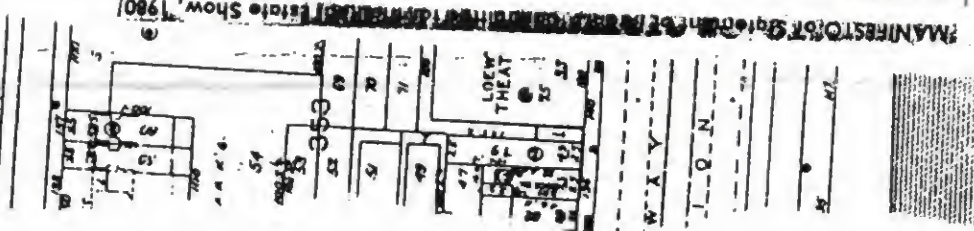
In an urban situation it may appear hard to learn things about animals because we feel so alienated from them. Other than our relatively domesticated dogs or cats, we have only the "phobic" city animals to consider. Nevertheless, these city animals which we prefer to ignore are all around us, were here before us and most likely will remain long after we are gone. Although we may cringe at the thought of a ratio of ten rats to one city dweller, their abundance is directly related to our proclivity for the ignorant disposal of garbage. Rats are cyclical; when there is nothing for them to eat they stop breeding. As long as we provide them with refuse they will revel.

Our view of the pigeon is similar. Unlike their country cousins, city pigeons are carriers of disease because they scavenge for survival in city filth. Seagulls, scavengers as well, have also discovered the immediate joys of garbage dumps. According to a recent project by Peter Fend and Christy Rupp, seagulls flocking about the Jamaica Bay garbage dump have interfered with so many airplanes taking off and landing at J.F.K. that the Federal Aviation Agency believes the airport should be closed until the hazard is eliminated.

Nature was the original inspirer of art, and so now it is only fitting that there should arise a unified appeal by artists against the systematic degradation of nature. The group show at ABC No.

Rio entitled "Animals Living in Cities" has brought together artists whose collective theme involves city animals, their role and their plight in urban society. The show was organized by Christy Rupp, founder of City Wildlife Projects, in an attempt to promote understanding of our cities' ecosystems. Says Rupp: "Artist can do things visually that others do verbally, and I think art of this nature can create a public awareness, so we rid ourselves of the concept of letting someone else do the job for us." The show reaffirms a feeling for the preservation of nature and the environment. It is a need for social change dramatically expressed in artistic forms.

Rupp, who studied animal behavior, started focussing on the problems of city animals about three years ago. Aside from recruiting the artists and their work, she also procured an interesting collection of urban animals. The gallery window was converted into a large cage wherein feathered birds attracted local passersby who wandered in with the hope of purchasing a pigeon and a clucking sassy squabs found in a park, several farm. The show also included a house full of cockroaches contributed by the Museum of Natural History, a very genteel looking rat, a mouse, a "New Wave" hamster (he had sunglasses), and an understandably frustrated cat. Rupp's contributions to the show included several plaster rats, pigeons and a papier mache seagull whose talon was entangled in a beer can. Apparently bleeding from sharp cans is the number one cause of death among city gulls.



text which shows solidarity with oppressed people, a recognition that mercantile and institutional structures oppress and distort their lives and works, and a recognition that artists, living and working in depressed communities, are comrades in the revaluation of property and the "whitening" of neighborhoods. It is important to focus attention on the way artists get used and pawns by greedy white developers.

It is important for artists to express solidarity with Third World and oppressed people.

It is important to show that people are not helpless—a way that express their resentment with things-as-they-are in a way that is constructive, exemplary, and interesting.

It is important to try to bridge the gap between artists and working people by putting art on a boulevard level.

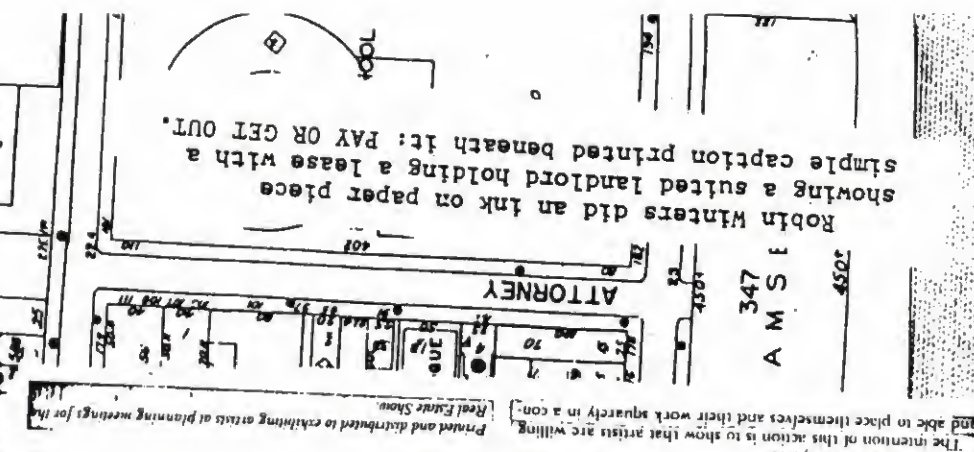
It is important to do something dramatic that is neither commercially oriented nor institutionally quarantined—a working well of human action and participation with each other that points up currents of feeling that are neither for sale nor for mortgaging into the shape of an institution.

It is important to do something that people (particularly in the art community) cannot immediately identify unless they question themselves and examine their own actions for an answer.

It is important to have fun.

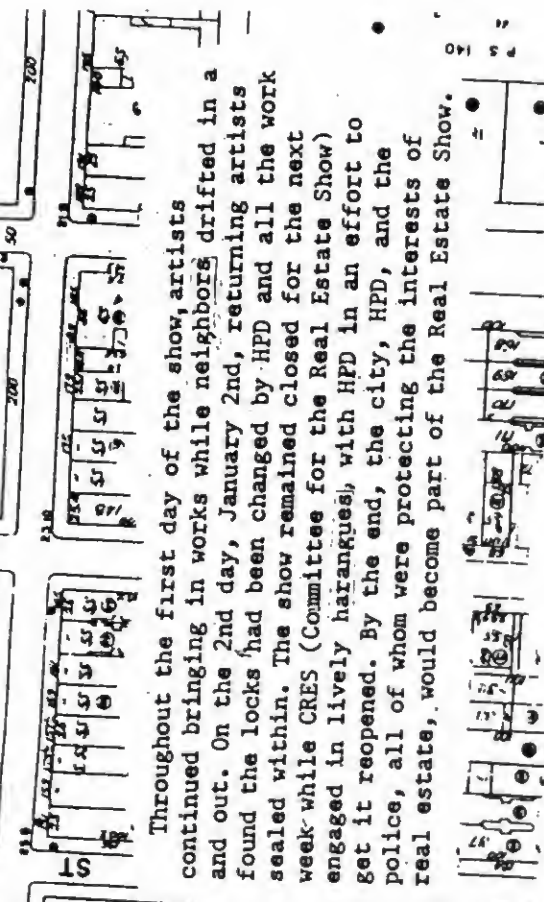
It is important to learn.

Printed and distributed to exhibiting artists at planning meetings for the Real Estate Show.



Robin Winters did an ink on paper piece showing a suited landlord holding a lease with a simple caption printed beneath it: PAY OR GET OUT.

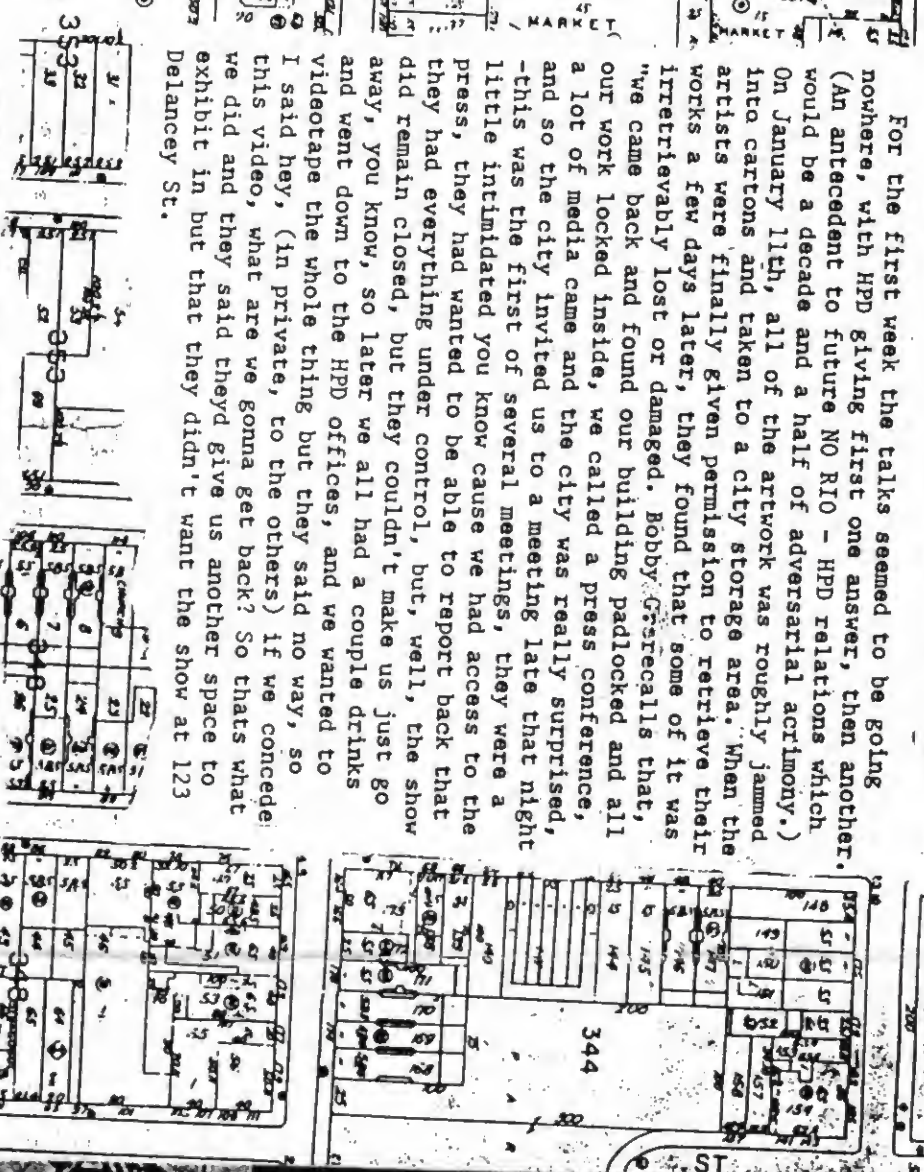
Throughout the first day of the show, artists continued bringing in works while neighbors drifted in and out. On the 2nd day, January 2nd, returning artists found the locks had been changed by HPD and all the work sealed within. The show remained closed for the next week while CRES (Committee for the Real Estate Show) engaged in lively harangues, with HPD in an effort to get it reopened. By the end, the city, HPD, and the police, all of whom were protecting the interests of real estate, would become part of the Real Estate Show.





For the first week the talks seemed to be going nowhere, with HPD giving first one answer, then another. (An antecedent to future NO RIO - HPD relations which would be a decade and a half of adversarial acrimony.) On January 11th, all of the artwork was roughly jammed into cartons and taken to a city storage area. When the artists were finally given permission to retrieve their works a few days later, they found that some of it was irretrievably lost or damaged. Bobby Gratecalls that, "we came back and found our building padlocked and all our work locked inside, we called a press conference, and a lot of media came and the city was really surprised, and so the city invited us to a meeting late that night - this was the first of several meetings, they were a little intimidated you know cause we had access to the press, they had wanted to be able to report back that they had everything under control, but, well, the show did remain closed, but they couldn't make us just go away, you know, so later we all had a couple drinks and went down to the HPD offices, and we wanted to videotape the whole thing but they said no way, so I said hey, (in private, to the others) if we concede this video, what are we gonna get back? So that's what we did and they said they'd give us another space to exhibit in but that they didn't want the show at 123 Delancey St.

There didn't seem to really be any specific reason for the city's insistence on the removal from 123 Delancey, except for the issue of authority and of playing by the rules. Which CRES had clearly broke. Yet, what was the difference if the Real Estate Show went on at 123 Delancey or any other place? The 'other place' would be one 'given' to the artists rather than one taken, and to a hierarchically obsessed bureaucracy this would seem to make all the difference, to them, it was even logical. One can only wonder at the irony, in light of later developments, that HPD was directly responsible for the founding of ABC NO RIO! Imagine, if they had just let the artists finish their show and pack up by January 22, 1980, bad press could have been avoided on the part of HPD!



Christy Rupp cleans a cage as Maria Acosta, whose family lives in the building, looks on. (Photo by Rebecca Houlston)



Christy organized the 'Animals living in cities' show in 1980. People from the neighborhood would lend their animals for the exhibit. "In the window was a cage of pigeons, that drew a lot of kids in... we actually had a little problem. People loaned us their best pigeons & some of them got taken by another kid". The pigeons were used in a very old rooftop game in which they are divided into two groups and each group of pigeons follows after a long stick being waved in a circle by a kid, each kid tries to get pigeons from the other's circle to fly over to theirs. "But it wasn't cool for them to be stolen from a show. The kid who lent them was very cute, I think he knew the kid who stole them. Another memory from the show was the chicken that lived at NO RIO for the duration of the exhibit. "When we were bored, we tried to hypnotize it. Someone in the neighborhood told me you put your finger in front of it. It would go into a trance. It was always out & about and never ran out of the gallery."

Bobby G. : "well, the city gave us this list of bombed out rejects, and we said no to all of them, at first, because it was a really cold winter, and after all, Delancey street had heat and electric, and was very visible to the public. So, we invited the press and HPD to a second grand opening, but it didn't work. The cops were there, and a couple people snuck in the back door and the cops got them and asked if HPD wanted to press charges and HPD said no - the captain of the precinct was there, for little us! - they didn't want any more bad publicity. HPD said we couldn't reenter the building because they couldn't sanction an illegal occupant. So the cops, they were now art cops, by force keeping us from our art, that's why they took our stuff uptown, they knew that they couldn't protect that building day and night without a lot more cops and a lot more bad press".

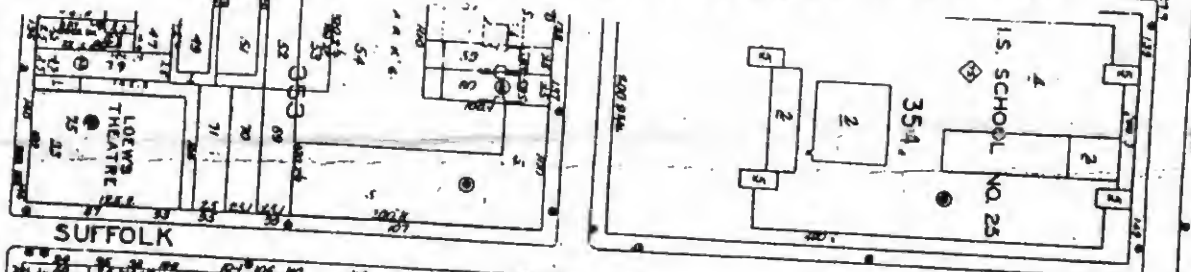
ANIMALS LIVING IN CITIES



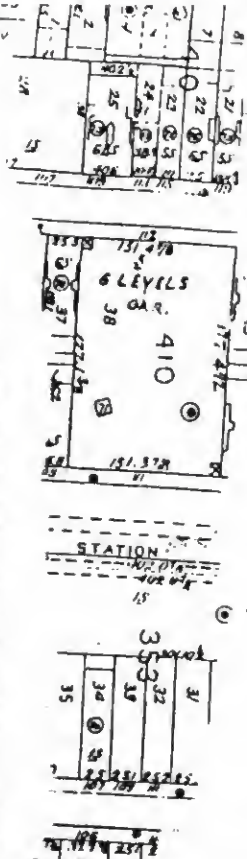
ABC NO RIO

Poster design by Christy Rupp, based on a photograph by Paul Duckworth.

NOV 16 - DEC 13 1980



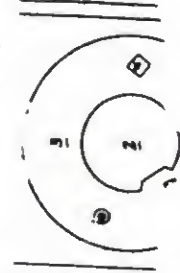
Alan Moore: "we were given this list of alternative sites to choose from, other empty/ city owned buildings, and I'm sure it was only because - I mean they were only willing to deal with us in this way at all - because they were so surprised that we were able to marshal so much good press on our behalf, a lot of papers were on our side and were saying nasty things about HPD. They at first just didn't believe that we had any kind of clout that they would have to respond to in order to save face. So they gave us this list, and we borrowed this car and went driving around checking them out, and they were all wrong, none of them were what we wanted really cause most were way too small or were in such bad condition, we used one of the addresses, 172 Delancey, for a bit as an office for CRES, but finally we settled on one place, a storefront at 156 Rivington st. and that's how we got it." Rebecca: "but originally we only wanted to keep the Real Estate Show open, at 123 Delancey, for two weeks, now the city was giving us this deal, a month to month lease for cheap, and rent free for the first two years!"





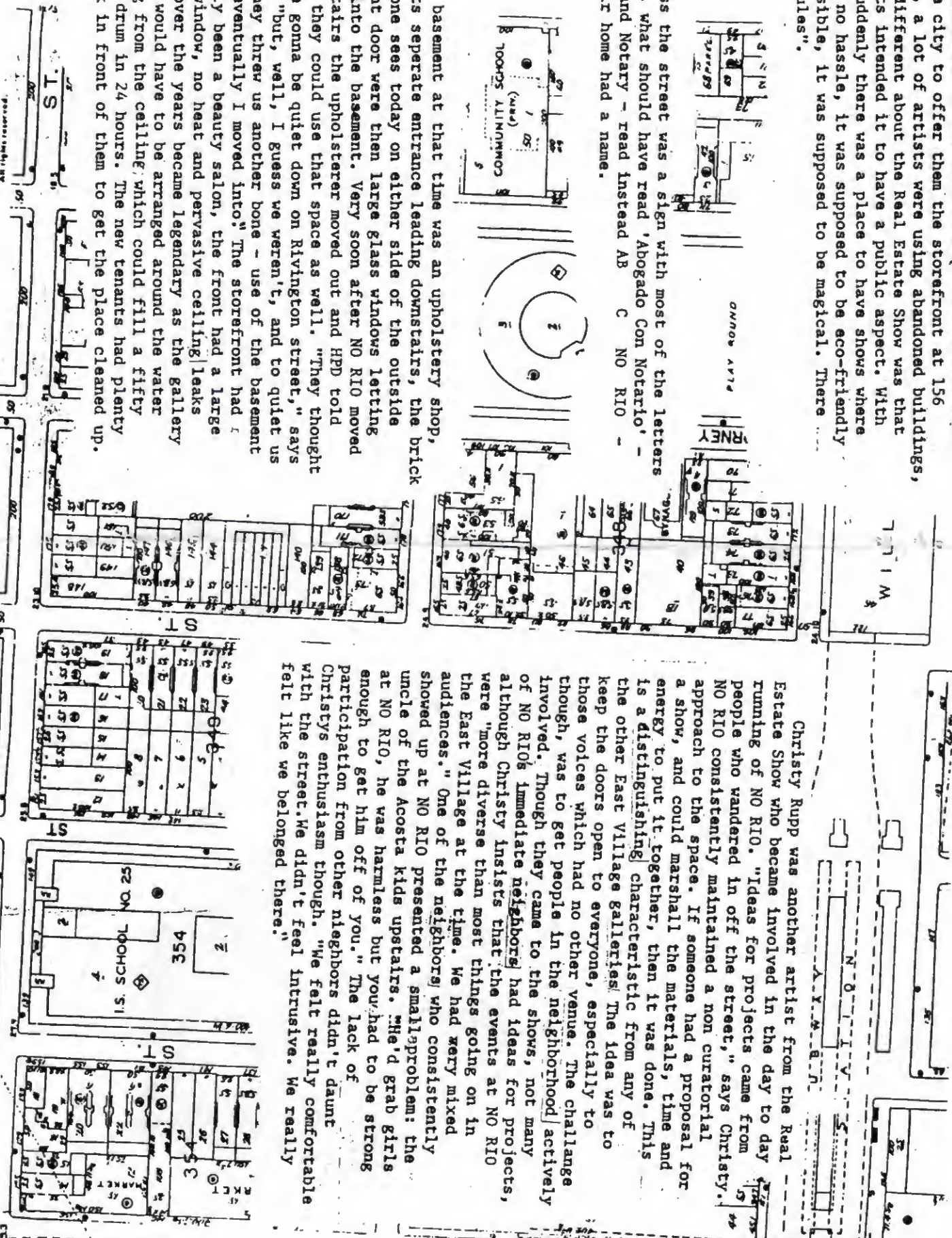
"There was never a desire to start a space. It just happened," remembers Christy Rupp, another Real Estate Show organizer and NO RIO co-founder. "The artists didn't expect the city to offer them the storefront at 156 Rivington, a lot of artists were using abandoned buildings, what was different about the Real Estate Show was that the artists intended it to have a public aspect. With NO RIO, suddenly there was a place to have shows where there was no hassle, it was supposed to be eco-friendly and accessible, it was supposed to be magical. There were no rules".

Across the street was a sign with most of the letters missing, what should have read 'Abogado Con Notario' - Lawyer and Notary - read instead AB C NO RIO - now their home had a name.



Christy Rupp was another artist from the Real Estate Show who became involved in the day to day running of NO RIO. "Ideas for projects came from people who wandered in off the street," says Christy. NO RIO consistently maintained a non curatorial approach to the space. If someone had a proposal for a show, and could marshal the materials, time and energy to put it together, then it was done. This is a distinguishing characteristic from any of the other East Village galleries. The idea was to keep the doors open to everyone, especially to those voices which had no other venue. The challenge though, was to get people in the neighborhood actively involved. Though they came to the shows, not many of NO RIO's immediate neighbors had ideas for projects, although Christy insists that the events at NO RIO were "more diverse than most things going on in the East Village at the time. We had very mixed audiences." One of the neighbors who consistently showed up at NO RIO presented a small problem: the uncle of the Acosta kids upstairs. "He'd grab girls at NO RIO, he was harmless but you had to be strong enough to get him off of you." The lack of participation from other neighbors didn't daunt Christy's enthusiasm though. "We felt really comfortable with the street. We didn't feel intrusive. We really felt like we belonged there."

The basement at that time was an upholstery shop, with its separate entrance leading downstairs, the brick walls one sees today on either side of the outside basement door were then large glass windows letting light into the basement. Very soon after NO RIO moved in upstairs the upholsterer moved out and HPD told NO RIO they could use that space as well. "They thought we were gonna be quiet down on Rivington street," says Bobby, "but, well, I guess we weren't, and to quiet us down they threw us another bone - use of the basement which eventually I moved into." The storefront had formerly been a beauty salon, the front had a large glass window, no heat and pervasive ceiling leaks which over the years became legendary as the gallery pieces would have to be arranged around the water running from the ceiling, which could fill a fifty gallon drum in 24 hours. The new tenants had plenty of work in front of them to get the place cleaned up.



AB-C-NO-RIO